

# **NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES**


SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE



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America's Media Makers:  
Production Grants

Institution: WGBH Educational Foundation

	NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES		DIVISION OF PUBLIC PROGRAMS 1100 PENNSYLVANIA AVE., NW WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506 ROOM 426 PUBLICPGMS@NEH.GOV 202/606-8269 WWW.NEH.GOV
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## SAMPLE PROPOSAL

This sample of the narrative portion from a grant is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with staff members in the NEH Division of Public Programs well before a grant deadline. This sample proposal does not include a budget, letters of commitment, or resumes. Please note that this document has been converted from a .pdf file, which may cause formatting errors.

**Project Title:** American Experience: Freedom Riders

**Institution:** WGBH Educational Foundation

**Project Director:** Mark Samels

**Grant Program:** America's Media Makers

**Grant Type:** Production, TR-50006-08

## Narrative

### A. Program Description

This is a request to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a production grant to support an ambitious multi-platform project on the Freedom Riders, the hundreds of civil rights activists who challenged segregation in interstate transport in the American South during the spring and summer of 1961. The centerpiece of the project is a special two-hour film presentation of *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE* produced by noted documentary producer Stanley Nelson, with a national PBS broadcast scheduled to coincide with the Rides' fiftieth anniversary in 2011. The Freedom Riders project also includes an interactive website, on which the documentary will be made available as streaming video; an extended series of vodcasts featuring Riders and scholars; a series of panel discussions and screening events, hosted by universities, museums, and humanities councils around the country; and a traveling exhibit for libraries, created in association with the Gilder Lehrman Institute. All of the project components have been carefully coordinated and scheduled to focus national attention on the Freedom Rides during the anniversary year, and to deepen public understanding of several key themes, including citizen politics and American democracy, nonviolence and social change, the dynamics of the civil rights movement, the politics and culture of the Cold War, diversity and the Rides, and the creation of a movement culture.

Because of the project's broad reach and scope, and its promise of bringing important humanities ideas to a large audience in new ways, we seek a Chairman's Special Award in the amount of \$[removed]. Total project costs are \$[removed].

### B. Content and creative approach

*Stand up and rejoice! A great day is here! We're fighting Jim Crow and the victory's near! Hallelujah, I'm a-travelin', Hallelujah, ain't it fine. Hallelujah, I'm a-travelin' down freedom's main line.*

-- 1961 Freedom song

In 1961, during the first year of John F. Kennedy's presidency, more than four hundred Americans participated in a bold and dangerous experiment designed to awaken the conscience of a complacent nation. Inspired by visions of social revolution and moral regeneration, these self-proclaimed "Freedom Riders" challenged the mores of a racially segregated society by performing a disarmingly simple act. Traveling together in small interracial groups, they sat where they pleased on buses and trains and demanded unrestricted access to terminal restaurants and waiting rooms, even in areas of the Deep South where such behavior was forbidden by law and custom.

Patterned after a 1947 Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) project known as the Journey of Reconciliation, the Freedom Rides began in early May with a single group of thirteen Riders recruited and trained by CORE's national staff. But by early summer the Rides had evolved into a broad-based movement involving hundreds of activists representing a number of allied local, regional, and national civil rights organizations. Attracting a diverse assortment of volunteers – black and white, young and old, male and female, religious and secular, Northern and Southern – the Freedom Rider movement transcended the traditional legalistic approach to civil rights, taking the struggle out of the courtroom and into the streets and jails of the Jim Crow South. Empowered by two United States Supreme Court decisions mandating the

desegregation of interstate travel facilities, the Freedom Riders brazenly flouted state and local segregation statutes, all but daring Southern officials to arrest them. Deliberately provoking a crisis of authority, the Riders challenged Federal officials to enforce the law and uphold the constitutional right to travel without being subjected to degrading and humiliating racial restrictions. Most amazingly, they did so knowing that their actions would almost certainly provoke a savage and violent response from militant white supremacists. Invoking the philosophy of nonviolent direct action, they willingly put their bodies on the line for the cause of racial justice. Openly defying the social conventions of a security-conscious society, they appeared to court martyrdom with a reckless disregard for personal safety or civic order. None of the obstacles placed in their path—not widespread censure, not political and financial pressure, not arrest and imprisonment, not even the threat of death—seemed to weaken their commitment to nonviolent struggle. On the contrary, the hardships and suffering imposed upon them appeared to stiffen their resolve, confounding their white supremacist antagonists and testing the patience of even those who sympathized with their cause.

Time and again, the Riders seemed on the verge of defeat, only to find ways to sustain and expand their challenge to Jim Crow segregation. After marauding Alabama Klansmen used bombs and mob violence to disrupt the original CORE Freedom Ride, student activists from Nashville stepped forward to organize a Ride of their own, eventually forcing reluctant federal officials to intervene on their behalf. Later, when Mississippi officials placed hundreds of Freedom Riders in prison, the net effect was to strengthen rather than to weaken the nonviolent movement. And on a number of other occasions attempts to intimidate the Freedom Riders and their supporters backfired, reinvigorating and prolonging a crisis that would not go away.

### *Television program*

The significance to the humanities of a television program devoted to the Freedom Riders is hard to overstate. More than a pivotal moment in the civil rights struggle, the Rides were also crucial to the social, political, and cultural realignments that defined the 1960s, and redefined America.

Drawing on a broad range of civil rights historical scholarship, and especially on the formidable research assembled by historian Raymond Arsenault in his recent and definitive assessment of the Freedom Rides, the program will take a broad general audience inside the insistent and innovative moment that seized the nation's attention in 1961.

This examination of the Freedom Riders is designed to amplify several key themes:

- Citizen politics and American democracy

Foreshadowed by the Montgomery bus boycott and the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides brought nonviolent direct action to the forefront of the fight for racial justice, initiating a turbulent decade of insurgent citizen politics that transformed the nature of American democracy. Animated by a broad range of grievances, from war and poverty to disenfranchisement and social intolerance, a new generation of Americans marched, protested, and sometimes committed acts of civil disobedience in the pursuit of liberty and justice. And many of them did so with the knowledge that the Freedom Riders had come before them.

The program describes the viral growth of the Freedom Rider movement, from thirteen members of a

self-professed radical vanguard to a remarkably broad-based movement involving hundreds of activists. It recounts the Kennedy administration's various efforts to contain the virus, including the effort to turn the movement from direct action to agitation for voting rights. It reminds us that while most of the nation's leading commentators and editors embraced the ideal of desegregation, very few acknowledged that the Rides and other disruptive tactics were a necessary catalyst for timely social change. In later years, the Riders would be hailed as courageous visionaries, but in their time they were more often criticized as misguided, if not dangerous, radicals.

- Nonviolence and social change

From the first, the Freedom Rides were suffused with the philosophy of nonviolence as a vehicle of social change. Indeed, the Freedom Rides, explicitly modeled on Gandhi's famous March to the Sea, represented a notably effective effort to apply the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence to the African American struggle for freedom and equality. The Freedom Riders' committed embrace of nonviolence made them all but invulnerable to traditional means of intimidation and control, and was a key factor in their movement's success.

The program traces the roots of the Freedom Riders' approach to nonviolent direct action to Bayard Rustin and the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, and notes that one of the CORE activists who came up with the idea of the 1961 Ride was immersed in a biography of Gandhi. It stresses the importance of the Nashville student movement's embrace of nonviolence, especially James Lawson's notion of the Beloved Community, as pursued by his acolytes John Lewis and Diane Nash. It shows how, to the bewilderment of white segregationists and the frustration of the Kennedy administration, the Freedom Riders turned unmerited suffering to their advantage in the bus terminals of Birmingham and Montgomery, and especially in the cells of Parchman Prison. It also notes that nonviolence was by no means a universally accepted tactic among Southern blacks, including the church deacons who rescued the Riders from trouble, shotguns in hand.

- Dynamics of the civil rights movement

The story of the Freedom Rides offers an unusual perspective on the inner dynamics of a civil rights movement, including generational tensions and struggles over strategy and tactics, organizational leadership, and the role of direct action. The program notes that the Riders' insistent embrace of nonviolent direct action was greeted with great skepticism by their more cautious elders, and by the leaders of powerful civil rights organizations committed to a legalistic approach to desegregation. It describes how the Rides, for all their impressive discipline, were rooted in the democratic demands of individual conscience, and defied organizational control. Recounting how movement leaders came together to stand behind the Riders after the mob violence in Montgomery, and how Dr. King was challenged by student leaders to join the Rides, the program shows how the Rides unified a fractious civil rights movement, and revealed its fault lines as well.

- Culture and politics of the Cold War

The Cold War, and the politics and culture that surrounded it, provided a crucial context for the Freedom Rides. The Rides began only a month after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, and battled for headlines with the Berlin crisis. For the Kennedy administration, the Rides represented an unwelcome and frustrating diversion from the president's near-exclusive focus on foreign affairs, at a time of escalating tensions with the Soviets.

The program recounts how the architects of the Rides deliberately tried to turn the president's passion for Cold War politics to their advantage, by exposing and dramatizing the hypocrisy of promoting freedom abroad while maintaining Jim Crow at home. It tells how Robert Kennedy's efforts to bring the Freedom Rider crisis to a quick end were motivated less by idealism than a wish to remove an obstacle to his brother's focus on an upcoming summit, and an embarrassment from the front pages. It tells how the Cold War raised the stakes for the Riders, by leading many critics to openly question their patriotism. It also explores the interplay of international politics and race relations in the segregationist white South, where the connection between "outside agitators" militating for change and communist infiltration was widely viewed as self-evident.

- Diversity and the Rides

Diversity was in many ways the hallmark of the Freedom Rides, and a key factor in making the Ride into a truly national phenomenon. The Riders were young and old, black and white, Northern and Southern, Christian and Jewish, religious and secular. They came from every region of the country, and every socioeconomic background.

The program will embody the diversity of the Riders by presenting a rich and varied cast of characters, presenting the individuated face of a vital mass movement. It will explore the various motivations of the Riders, which ranged from deeply spiritual to deeply political, and virtually everything in between. In the process, it will debunk the widespread misconception that the Freedom Riders were overwhelmingly white and Northern, by showing the important and numerically significant role played by Southern-born black Riders. It will also show that in the social and political context of 1961, when intolerance of unorthodox behavior was often reflexive, the Freedom Riders' diversity could inspire deep suspicions, especially in the white South.

- Creation of a movement culture

Central to the Freedom Rides was the creation of a unique movement culture that sustained the Riders through an extraordinarily intense and challenging period. That culture, a unique admixture of African American religion and nonviolent philosophy, provided them with the emotional reinforcement they needed to survive brutality, intimidation, intense criticism, and deprivation, and somehow grow stronger. It helped to make them into the shock troops of the civil rights struggle, and united them as veterans of a hard-fought but nonviolent war.

The program recounts the experiences of the Riders on buses, at mass meetings, and in prison, showing how they responded to intimidation and worse with song and passive resistance, steadfastly refusing to meet violence with violence. It recounts the exhilaration that followed the Mother's Day attacks in Anniston and Birmingham, as the Riders proved to themselves that they could withstand

brutality without compromising their nonviolent principles. It describes the long night at First Baptist Church in Montgomery, where the Riders and their supporters turned a siege into an occasion for communal solidarity. Perhaps most remarkably of all, it tells how the Riders used their incarceration in one of the South's most dreaded prisons to create an unlikely movement university that at once revealed their jailers' weaknesses and their own strengths.

For all its undeniable historical significance, the saga of the Freedom Riders is also a rollicking good story, with an endlessly fascinating cast of characters and plot lines worthy of a Hollywood screenwriter. In telling that story, the film will take full advantage of an impressive arsenal of story-telling resources, beginning with a formidable array of archival footage and photographs; indeed, the role of news photographers and television cameramen in documenting the events of the Freedom Rides is an important part of the story itself. Fortunately, the visual record is complete enough that the film will only rarely have to rely on minimalist stylized cinematography to dramatize key events. Music, another essential element of the Rides, provides the film with a resource that both documents history and brings that history to life.

Most important, the film will have access to the Riders themselves. One of the defining aspects of the Freedom Rider movement was the role played by young people, many no older than their early twenties in 1961. Many of those Riders are still with us, able and willing to recall the events that for many still define their lives. Their interviews will be the lifeblood of the film, and promise to give it the immediacy and intimacy characteristic of the best historical documentaries.

Just as Arsenault's 2006 book represented the first book-length scholarly treatment of the Freedom Riders, this two-hour program will represent the first comprehensive film treatment of the subject. (*Eyes on the Prize*, the landmark 14-hour television history of the Civil Rights movement, devoted only 20 minutes to the Rides.) This special presentation of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, augmented by innovative digital media and public education elements, will help give the Freedom Rides the national attention they deserve, precisely fifty years after the Freedom Riders made history.

#### *Website and vodcasts*

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE will create an in-depth Freedom Riders interactive website, featuring many of the elements that have made American Experience Online one of the leading history sites on the web. In addition to familiar elements (film description and transcript, primary sources, further readings, interviews, maps, timeline, teacher's guide, etc.), the website will feature 25 specially created short videos, or vodcasts, accessible as a streaming video online both as a streaming video online and via downloads. These vodcasts, of approximately two minutes' duration, will include selections from interviews with the Riders, many shot at the same time as the interviews for the television program. Featuring content designed in consultation with humanities advisers well-versed in using new technologies for education, the vodcasts will reinforce several of the program's key themes, including the diversity of the Riders, the role of nonviolent direct action, and the creation of a movement culture. They will provide users with an opportunity to learn more about the unique experiences of the Riders as they challenged Jim Crow, and themselves.

Responding to the increasing convergence of the broadcast and online worlds, the Freedom Riders website will also feature streaming video of the entire television program, enabling users to watch the program online.

### *Screenings and Forums*

In collaboration with universities, museums, and humanities councils around the nation, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE will conduct a series of eight screenings and discussion forums devoted to the Freedom Riders. These events will showcase the film, introduce the filmmaker and key scholars, and bring together local surviving Freedom Riders, who will share their stories with younger audiences, as well as older audiences eager to recall or learn about a pivotal moment in American history, when personal commitment and civic engagement literally changed the world.

Toward that end, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has entered into discussions with a range of potential partners, including Howard University/WHUT in Washington, D.C., The Simon Wiesenthal Center/Museum of Tolerance (Los Angeles and New York), the John F. Kennedy Library (Boston), and the Illinois State Humanities Council (Chicago), all of which have expressed interest in hosting these public events. Discussions are also underway with the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Minnesota, both of which have strong links to the original Freedom Rides.

### *Traveling exhibit*

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE will contract with the Gilder Lehrman Institute, a leading developer of document-based panel exhibitions on American history, to create a traveling exhibition devoted to the Freedom Riders. The exhibition will travel to twenty libraries in locations around the country. Like other Gilder Lehrman Institute exhibitions, the Freedom Riders traveling exhibit will bring a compelling but often overlooked story from American history to people of all ages and backgrounds. The exhibition will appeal visually through the rich use of photographs; brief, well-written captions and introductory texts; and high quality, often enlarged, images of key original documents related to the Freedom Rides.

The content of the traveling exhibit will also be made available on the Freedom Riders website.

### *C. Storyline*

In developing the storyline for this two-hour television program on the Freedom Riders, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has made use of a narrative vocabulary and dramatic architecture that has served the series well.

The program is organized as a prologue and three acts, told chronologically, with each act divided into discrete scenes. The scenes are designed to explore key themes and dramatize key events, while the act divisions are designed to provide narrative shape and heighten emotional tension. Exposition is distributed rather than concentrated, and is dramatized whenever possible. The narrative grammar is intentionally varied, to defy predictability and maintain viewer interest. Some scenes are revealed in relatively broad detail, while others are comparatively fine-grained. Some unfold from beginning to end, while others begin in the midst of action.

Like the Freedom Rider movement, the Freedom Rider story is democratic and decentralized. It weaves together events in various locales, in the South and in Washington, D.C. It includes a broad range of characters, including movement leaders; state and local officials; officials from the Justice Department and in the White House; and the Freedom Riders themselves. It also features ordinary



Southerners, black and white, including whites with a broad range of opinions about race relations and the future of segregation. While the program's point of view is unashamedly sympathetic to the goals of the Riders, and admiring of their courage, there is every effort to understand the emotional logic of white resistance, and to hear that logic explained by white Southerners on their terms, and preferably in their own words.

A brief *prologue* tells the story of the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, the critical but often overlooked precursor of the Freedom Rides, orchestrated by Bayard Rustin and CORE. It introduces the story of Irene Morgan, whose spontaneous act of defiance on a Virginia bus led to an important but widely ignored Supreme Court decision banning racial segregation in interstate transportation. It recounts the Journey's ride through the Upper South, and places it in the context of Gandhism and the debate over the role of nonviolent direct action in the postwar civil rights struggle.

*Act One* focuses on the first CORE Freedom Ride in May of 1961. The act begins with the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy, describing Kennedy's Cold War pre-occupations and relative lack of interest in civil rights, and the expectations of the civil rights community.

It then moves on to describe the origins and motivations of the CORE Ride, followed by the recruitment and training of the first Riders. It follows the CORE Ride through the upper South, to Atlanta, where the Riders met with Martin Luther King, Jr., and where they heard prescient warnings of troubles ahead in Alabama. It describes how Klan violence in Anniston and Birmingham brought the embattled and determinedly nonviolent Riders to the attention of the Kennedy Justice Department and the nation, and led to the reluctant decision to terminate the Ride.

*Act Two* focuses on an event-filled few days in mid-May. It begins with the dramatic decision of students in Nashville to resume the Ride, born of a refusal to give violent white segregationists a victory, and made despite the objections of more cautious elders. It follows the Nashville Riders to Birmingham, where they were arrested and jailed by Bull Connor. It recounts Connor's abortive efforts to return the Riders to Tennessee, and their dramatic return to Birmingham. It tracks the tense negotiations between state and federal officials over how best to guarantee the Riders safety for the trip to Montgomery. It describes the vicious mob violence that greeted the Riders and a top federal official in Montgomery, and tells how that violence both unified a fractious movement behind the Riders and impelled a reluctant Kennedy administration to send in federal marshals. Finally, it recounts the tense night at the First Baptist Church, where hundreds of Riders and supporters were besieged by an angry mob until they were finally evacuated by the Alabama National Guard.

*Act Three* focuses on the experiences of the burgeoning Freedom Rider movement in Mississippi during the summer of 1961. It begins with the surreal scene of a militarized convoy bringing a small group of Riders from Montgomery to Jackson, Mississippi, and backs up to reveal the deal struck by Robert Kennedy with Mississippi officials, effectively trading the Riders' safety for their constitutional rights. It describes the rapid growth of Rides, as Riders travel down South in increasing numbers, much to the displeasure of the white Southerners who see them as troublemakers and subversives. It follows the Riders through their arrests in Jackson and their refusal to accept bail, and Kennedy through his various and unsuccessful efforts to bring the crisis to a close. It recounts the fateful decision by state officials to send the Riders overflowing their jails to dreaded Parchman Prison Farm, and how the Riders turned the prison into a kind of movement university of nonviolence. It recounts how the Riders thwarted Mississippi's efforts to choke the movement financially. Finally, it tracks the results of the September decision by the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue regulations banning racial discrimination in interstate travel, and ends with

demonstrators traveling to the 1963 March in Washington -- on integrated buses.

#### D. Audience

The different components of this multi-platform project are designed to bring the story of the Freedom Riders to a broad and varied national audience, including demographic groups not typically associated with public television viewing.

The two-hour television documentary, broadcast in prime time on PBS, will reach a broad general audience, with special emphasis on adults 35 years of age and older.

The website, featuring digital streaming video and downloadable vodcasts, is designed to reach a younger, more technologically-inclined audience, including people intent on encountering media on their own schedule and their own terms. The vodcasts are also specifically designed to work as drop-in video in the classroom, suitable for use in a wide range of secondary school and college courses.

The screenings and public forums, hosted by universities, museums, and humanities councils, are aimed primarily at high school and college students, enabling the project to reach a younger audience, including members of underserved populations in inner-city schools and historically black colleges.

The traveling exhibition is expected to attract an audience consisting primarily of out-of school adults, secondary school students, and college students in twenty communities across the nation.

We expect the various audiences targeted by these varied media platforms to come to the subject of the Freedom Riders for different reasons, and to take away different lessons from their encounter. Older users may come because they recall the events at home and abroad during the spring and summer of 1961; but they will likely come away with a new appreciation of how their vivid memories of the Cold War relate to the drama in the Deep South. Younger viewers will be attracted to a story in which young people, particularly young African American people, play a pivotal role; but they will likely come away with new appreciation of just how recent a phenomenon was state-sanctioned racial segregation, and how corrosive. All users, young and old, will likely come away thinking in new ways about the importance of individual conscience and civic engagement, impressed with what some four hundred Americans, engaged and committed to their beliefs, were able to achieve not so long ago.

#### E. Format

Each of the various elements of this multi-platform project is designed to deepen the audience's interest in the Freedom Riders' story, and to deepen their appreciation of the important issues and ideas that surround it. The centerpiece of the project, the television program, provides an ideal format to feature the story in its full dramatic power, and in its rich historical context. Featuring a dramatic narrative with strong characters and high stakes, with powerful contemporary words, iconic archival imagery, soaring music, and compelling first person testimony -- all assembled by a leading practitioner of the documentary craft -- the program promises to leave an indelible impression on a broad national audience.

The website, by contrast, presents users with a way to engage some of the same material in a more

active, and interactive, fashion. While the television program takes viewers on a carefully planned intellectual and emotional journey, the website is designed to enable users to navigate on their own. Instead of hearing from only two or three Riders about their experiences inside Parchman Prison, as they might on the television program, users of the website might choose to hear from ten. While the television program can describe the diversity that is at the heart of the Freedom Rider movement, and occasionally embody it, the website and especially the vodcasts can enable the user to experience it for themselves.

At public forums, participants will get to hear from local Riders, in an intimate setting. They will get to ask questions, and relate the historical experience of the Riders to their own cities and towns, and to their own lives. They will get to feel, in a way the television program or website can only assert, that the Freedom Riders were ordinary Americans, from towns like their own.

The traveling exhibit, perhaps the most explicitly didactic of the formats involved, takes the Freedom Rider story into local public libraries. As such, it provides an ideal way to focus not just an individual's attention, but an entire community's, on the Freedom Rider saga.

## J. Progress

Over a nine-month development process at AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, series staff has designed and planned an ambitious multi-platform project. We have conducted extensive book research on the Freedom Riders, assembling a significant library of books, articles, and memoirs. We have formed a partnership with Gilder Lehrman to create the project's traveling exhibition, and have entered into discussions with universities, museums, and humanities councils about hosting panel discussions and screening events. We have assembled and consulted with a distinguished board of humanities advisers for the television production, including the single most authoritative expert on the Freedom Rides, Professor Raymond Arsenault, with whom we have had several face-to-face meetings in Boston. We have lined up additional humanities advisers for the vodcasts. We have also secured the agreement of Stanley Nelson, a prominent documentary producer with deep knowledge of civil rights history, and his company, Firelight Media, to produce the film. We have also created a budget and detailed work plan.

We have selected key themes and written a proposal and film treatment, providing a detailed road map for the production ahead. The crucial next step, which will be greatly facilitated by the comprehensive database assembled by Arsenault over years of research, is for Nelson and his collaborator Marcia Smith to contact the Riders themselves, and to arrange for the interviews during which they will tell their own stories on camera. (It should be emphasized that the treatment was written without the benefit of those interviews, relying instead on previously published materials, and on Arsenault's research notes.)